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Plumbing the depths

February 09, 2009

By engaging deeply with a text through multiple readings, students can come to appreciate its detail and art, writes Bob Hillman.

The new English course that began last year is divided into three areas of study, which principally define the key knowledge and skills to be gained by students in year 12. An area of study that is perhaps the most engaging is "reading and responding".

This part of the course, which appears in both unit 3 and unit 4, calls on students to study a text from a list of 20 published each year by the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority. One text is studied in each unit. There are different genres on the list, including novels, short stories, poetry, non-fiction and films. Teachers select texts that they feel best engage and challenge their classes.

There are three formal occasions where students will be assessed on the selected texts. The first is in unit 1 and it may take the form of an oral presentation or a written response. The class teacher will determine this, but a quick poll of schools would suggest that most classes complete a written piece for this outcome. In unit 4, however, the outcome must be written and is worth 50 per cent of the assessment for that unit. Finally students will be offered a choice of two topics on each text in the English examination in October.

The new course spells out quite specifically the skills and information that are needed to fulfil the expectations of the course and to achieve a good result.

The road to success begins by engaging with the text and enjoying the challenge of deconstructing the messages and ideas the author or director presents to us. This can only be done by a close study of the text and several readings. For most people, the initial reading or viewing primarily involves understanding the plot and characters, while gaining some preliminary insights into the key values and themes being offered by the author or director. It is really on the subsequent, multiple readings that students can truly come to appreciate the detail and art of the text.

Most successful students will have read or viewed their text half a dozen times by the end of the year. Each new reading of a passage, chapter or scene increases familiarity, which can breed new insight.

Not only are students expected to gain a working knowledge of plots, characters and themes of a text, but they also need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how these are a vehicle for a deeper commentary on social, historical and/or cultural values that are embodied in the text.

A number of the texts on the list were written outside Australia (notably *Of Love and Shadows*, *Sky Burial* and *The Kite Runner*), others are based on historical events (*Richard III* and *Generals Die in Bed*). These allow us to step outside our own world, but at the same time offer us the opportunity to evaluate and appreciate the differing cultural norms in relation to our own.

While the structures, features and conventions used by authors to construct meaning have always been part of an English course, there is now greater emphasis on exploring the role of the author or director in leading their audience. As the text is explored students need to ask themselves about how the author or director has created a particular tone or atmosphere. They need to analyse the language, imagery, metaphor and symbolism to understand how the reader or viewer is being drawn in.

Not only do students need to understand this, they must also demonstrate their knowledge in their writing. Importantly, this cannot be done gratuitously, but must convey an ownership of insights and their application to the topic.

The paragraph below is an excellent example of this knowledge at work. The student has looked beyond the dialogue of the play to consider how the stage directions of the playwright portray the essence of a character and has incorporated this insight into the analysis of Alice, from the play *A Man for All Seasons*. It is done seamlessly and adds meaning to the essay itself.

"Alice is not More's first wife nor is she the mother of his adored daughter, Margaret, whose intelligence and grace are evident immediately. Rather she sees herself removed from the important world which seems to dominate her husband's life. She is self-conscious of her lack of education and this is further magnified by More's outward pride in his daughter's scholarly interaction with the elite of England. Alice seems out of place in most scenes and Bolt reveals her psychological and emotional state very clearly in his stage instructions throughout the play. The actor is called on to respond variously as 'bitterly', 'exasperated', 'hostile', 'harshly', 'irritably', 'stiffly', and 'indignant'. The cumulative effect for the audience is a resentful woman who is not at peace with herself or her situation."

As well, detailed use of the text in supporting a view or perspective is vital. The following paragraph responds to a topic about John Wade, from *In the Lake of the Woods*, taking responsibility for his actions. This paragraph is exploring his cognisance of his own behaviour in Vietnam. The writer expertly employs images of colour and tone used by the author, Tim O'Brien. The writer also steps back from the text and discusses his interpretation of the interrelationship between O'Brien and the readers themselves, challenging them to consider the choices Wade makes.

"There are, however, incidents embedded within O'Brien's text which offer Wade 'the inconvenient squeeze of moral choice', a choice between a 'life of illusion' and a life of reality. As the sun casts its last shades of pink light over what truly was a land of 'living deadness', Thinbill offers Wade a reprieve from his life of illusion. 'Don't you think we should . . . should do something?' A window instead of a mirror, for the first time Wade is governed by his own choice. Yet illusion had become so interwoven with Wade's sense of self that 'confession felt odd. No trapdoors, no secret wires.' Still, Wade is offered a choice. The reader can no longer unequivocally sympathise with Wade and his intolerable past. O'Brien has invited us to share a moment of clarity where there is an alternative to retreat within illusion, but Wade disregards it and wilfully continues his life of deception."

The best advice students can be given is to develop their skills in text interpretation throughout the year. As this occurs, the ability to think for themselves and offer personal insights and understandings becomes part of the enjoyment of literature.

Those who believe that teachers and assessors are seeking a specific response to a topic or text are wrong. And the very best responses in the state are those where students have developed knowledge and insights into their text and confidently present them in response to the topic they have been set. Students should be bold in presenting their views, avoiding simplistic regurgitation of tired and overused formulaic responses. Ultimately, success and personal satisfaction come from the mastery of the sophisticated VCE texts that are on offer.

*Bob Hillman is a senior English teacher at Trinity Grammar School in Kew.*

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[\*\*Thu, Dec 9:\*\* The Age Teacher Seminars - Using The Age with years 9 to 12](#)



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